

Hidden Treasures: Why Build Community?

From *Hidden Treasures* by Susan A. Rans

Available online at <http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/images/hiddentreasures.pdf>

Much has been made of the threats to community life in today's busy, impersonal world. We have been warned about the increasing isolation, disconnection and passivity of civic life. We have also been bombarded with images and stereotypes of failed communities, impoverished places, dangerous places, places without hope. If these two jeremiads are combined, it would seem the future looks awfully bleak for our communities.

But the overwhelming evidence of the stories collected here and of the hundreds of other community efforts we have encountered since 1993 is that strong communities exist everywhere. They come in all shapes and sizes, all economic levels, urban and rural—but they share in common one important understanding: they are possessed of many **assets**, which, once mobilized and connected, can make great contributions.

Asset-based community development begins with the assumption that successful community building involves rediscovering and mobilizing resources already present in any community:

- ⇒ The skills and resources of its individuals,
- ⇒ The power of voluntary associations, achieved through building relationships
- ⇒ The assets present in the array of local institutions, the physical infrastructure of the community and the local economy.

Another way of saying this is: successful community development is *asset-based, internally-focused, and relationship-driven*. Although some resources from outside the community are often needed, the key to lasting solutions comes from within. The gifts and skills of residents and the assets of the physical community are always the starting place. No plan, solution or organization from outside the community can duplicate what is already there. Over time, some simple but powerful tools have been developed to aid this rediscovery and mobilization, tools that have emerged from practical experience.

All communities are first composed of *individuals*, each of which has gifts she or he brings to the group. The best and most creative communities are aware of these gifts and provide opportunities for them to be given. But simply discovering and inventorying individual gifts is not enough. Asset-based community development is about finding ways in which to create connections between

gifted individuals. Making these connections, *building relationships*, is the heart and soul of community building and the subject of this book.

Individuals who share common interests and goals form *associations*. Garden clubs, fraternal organizations, bowling leagues, book clubs, church groups: each brings individuals into association. Connecting individuals who have formerly been isolated to others who share their interests through community associations is the way to build lasting, multi-faceted relationships where none previously existed. Many of the communities described in this book have undertaken projects to make these connections.

All communities, no matter how poor, have within them a series of *institutions* that can support the gifted individuals and powerful associations found there. Asset-based community development involves local institutions in the process of community-building. Parks, schools, libraries, churches, businesses—all have a role to play. They can be involved with the local community as property owners, gathering centers, economic entities and incubators for community leadership.

Other assets include the *physical environment* of a community, its greenspaces, transportation centers and gathering places. And the *local economy* is an asset to be harnessed to build wealth and distribute benefits. Taken together, all of the assets listed provide strong bedrock upon which any community can build.

So, quite simply, finding and connecting existing assets is the most important work a community can do. And the more assets that are connected and mobilized, the stronger a community becomes. No one can be left out of the process if it is to succeed. Everyone and everything must be included.